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Landscape and scale in media representations: the construction of offshore farm labour in Ontario, Canada

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Thousands of migrant workers travel from Mexico and the Caribbean to Ontario every year to assist Canadian farmers in their horticulture operations. These migrants have become a structural necessity to the industry, ensuring growth and profits. I propose that exploitative and coercive labour practices are legitimated and sustained through cultural representations which identify migrants not only as outsiders to the community and a cultural threat, but also as economic assets and subordinate labour. A content analysis of the Ontario daily newsprint media between 1996 and 2002 reveals that the construction of offshore workers relies on coexisting dualisms created on different geographical scales. These dualisms work in tandem to produce a powerful and pervasive discourse of subordination.

Offshore labour has become a regular feature of Ontario's horticulture industry. Every year, the Canadian government facilitates the recruitment of thousands of seasonal workers from Mexico and the Caribbean to help Ontario farmers to bring in their harvest. Researchers have criticized the program for its exploitative and coercive labour practices.¹ Yet it has remained in place for decades, and public outcry against it has been minimal. I suggest that the representation of migrant workers in the economic and cultural landscape of rural Ontario plays a pivotal role in the ideological justification of current labour practices and in sustaining the program. In particular, I propose that the discourse of migrant labour is fragmented along various geographical scales, but that scale-particular narratives interlock to subordinate and marginalize seasonal labour migration.

At a time when some researchers continue to draw on Carl Sauer and use essentialized ethnic categories to explain rural landscape and social relationships in agricultural production,² it is politically important to expose the ideological underpinnings of landscape representation. I seek, therefore, to reveal the relationship between particular 'ways of seeing'³ and the situation of migrant labour as a subordinate but necessary element of Ontario's horticulture industry.⁴ While my focus is on the discursive representations of offshore workers, I recognize that these representations are recursively linked to the material practices in the agricultural economy.

I examine the representation of foreign farm workers in the Ontario daily newsprint media between 1996 and 2002. A content analysis reveals narratives of displacement and non-belonging. In addition, the identity construction of the offshore workers relies on several coexisting dualisms that are created on different geographical scales. These dualisms distinguish between workplace and living space, the farm and the community, and Canada and the 'homeland'. I conclude that these representations contribute to the legitimization of the offshore program.

Background

A history of the offshore program

The Commonwealth Caribbean and Mexican Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program, or offshore program, regulates the recruitment of foreign farm labour for Ontario's harvest season. The program was part of a series of steps responding to the supposedly 'special' nature of farming in Canada⁵ that justified the exclusion of agriculture from labour protection legislation. While the offshore program officially aims to improve the economic prosperity of both Canada and the migrant workers,⁶ it reflects processes of racialization of non-European groups. As late as 1963, Canadian immigration officers who interviewed applicants for the program described "Negro" males from the Caribbean as childlike, indolent, lazy and stupid,⁷ while Caribbean women were depicted as immoral and promiscuous.

Since its first inception in 1966 the offshore program has grown continuously. In 1998, Ontario farming operations recruited 5233 workers from Mexico and 6937 from the Caribbean to work primarily as fruit, vegetable and tobacco pickers, but also in greenhouses, nurseries and canning factories. The towns of Simcoe, Tillsonburg, St Catharines and Leamington each attracted more than 1000 foreign seasonal workers in 1998.⁸

Tanya Basok provides a detailed account of the importance of the offshore program to Ontario's horticulture industry, and the working and living conditions of workers who participate in it.⁹ The vast majority of participants are men, most of them employed in tobacco, vegetable, fruit and apple growing operations. An increasing number are also working in greenhouses.¹⁰ Offshore workers are employed as farm workers, for planting, pruning, feeding livestock, etc., and as harvesters to bring in the crop. Their wages are minimum wage or slightly higher, but significantly below those of Canadian workers with similar jobs. Workers are expected to work long hours and weekends if needed, and they are routinely exposed to pesticides, chemical solvents, sun and heat.¹¹ During the tenure of their employment, offshore workers live in housing provided by the growers – mostly bunk accommodations located on the farms.

Relevant criteria for participation in the program are that workers should be married, should be poor, should have low levels of education and should support large families. Although participants receive higher wages in Canada than in Mexico or the Caribbean, wages and working conditions are generally below Canadian standards. An important aspect that differentiates offshore workers from Canadian labour is that the former can easily be intimidated into complying with their working conditions. Since they are only

authorized to work for one employer, their ability to remain in the program depends on this employer's satisfaction with the worker's performance.¹²

Some researchers have suggested that Caribbean and Mexican offshore workers constitute an 'unfree' labour force.¹³ 'Unfree labour' generally refers to the denial to workers of the right to circulate freely in the labour market.¹⁴ While the notion of unfree labour is often applied to feudalism and slavery, in the context of the offshore program it reflects the coercive labour practices under which 'workers are not only unable to change employment, but they are also unfree to refuse the employers' request for their labour when need arises'.¹⁵ Although workers are legally free, they face the continuous threat of expulsion from the program and consequent deportation from Canada.¹⁶

Under the offshore program, growers are expected to provide free accommodation to workers, pay at least Canadian minimum wage, contribute to the cost of air travel to Canada, provide transportation to and from the airport and pay an administrative fee. While the total expenses in hiring foreign workers may in fact exceed the costs of employing Canadian workers, growers who hire offshore labour receive obedient workers who agree to live on the workplace and 'comply with all rules set down by the employer relating to safety, discipline, and the care and maintenance of property'.¹⁷ Basok argues that Ontario's growers have grown so accustomed to foreign farm labour that the offshore program has become a 'structural necessity' for their horticulture operations, enabling many of them to expand and accumulate large profits.¹⁸ In this paper I suggest that the cultural representation of offshore workers in the rural landscape of Ontario contributes to the legitimation of the constraints on these workers' freedom and of their substandard working conditions, thus enabling the relatively smooth functioning of this labour regime.

Landscape and scale

Geography has offered various approaches to the study of landscape. George Henderson recently identified four dominant discourses on landscape, associated with different traditions of geographic scholarship.¹⁹ These discourses treat landscape as expression of rural lifestyle, manifestation of everyday social space, material reflection of social relations, and ideology. Here I assume the fourth perspective of landscape, which Henderson also describes as 'apocryphal' landscape because it does not directly reveal authentic social relations, but rather an ideological 'way of seeing'.²⁰ When Stephen Daniels and Denis Cosgrove say, 'A landscape is a cultural image', they refer to the ideological representation of people and objects through landscape.²¹ In fact, many cultural geographers concerned with landscape interpret the very idea of 'culture' as an ideology.²²

The manner in which people are situated and represented in landscape can reveal ideologies of subordination and exclusion.²³ David Sibley, for example, showed that the portrayal of gypsies as uncivilized, dirty and a 'polluting presence' in the English countryside reflects 'the assumption that the countryside belongs to the privileged'.²⁴ He uncovers the discursive construction of landscape 'as a stereotyped pure space

which cannot accommodate difference'.²⁵ In a similar manner, the representation of migrant workers in rural landscape reveals underlying ideologies.

In California, for example, the representation of landscape has historically played an important role in the marginalization of migrant workers. While migrant workers are not rendered completely invisible in the imagination of rural landscape, they are pushed into the background and represented in a light that devalues their economic contribution and denies them the status of human agents.²⁶ As dehumanized and objectified labour power, migrant workers are subject to processes of social exclusion and economic exploitation.

Basok notes that in many Ontario communities 'the Mexican invasion of the local supermarket has become a part of the social landscape, as has the image of Mexican men riding their bicycles along rural roads'.²⁷ Since offshore workers cannot afford their own cars and public transit does not reach the farms where they live and work, they often travel by bike to local stores, to church or to neighbouring farms to visit fellow workers. Clearly, Mexican and Caribbean migrant workers are not invisible in the rural landscape. Yet the cultural image revealed of these workers reinforces un-belonging. While the presence of foreign migrant workers is acknowledged, they are not perceived as part of the local community. Rather, they are represented as temporary visitors who leave again after the harvest – despite the fact that many workers stay up to ten months in Ontario and return annually. Smart makes similar observations of Alberta, Canada: 'The presence of Mexican seasonal workers in the community is known but not felt'.²⁸

Geographical scale is a powerful analytic concept for understanding the social production of landscape.²⁹ Andrew Herod remarks that 'scale needs to be treated dialectically...Scale is not merely socially produced but is also socially producing'.³⁰ In this sense, scale is not only a reflection of material practices but also 'a way of framing conceptions of reality'.³¹ The newsprint media's cultural representations of migrant workers on different scales are therefore not independent from scale-particular material practices of the offshore program and the agricultural economy. While I recognize that media representations reflect existing economic relationships, my analysis of scale in media discourse focuses on the ideological underpinnings and the 'rhetorical stances of political actors'³² that shape economic practices.

Don Mitchell has examined the relationship between the 'material' and 'ideological scales' in the context of labour conflict between agricultural migrant workers and California growers in the 1930s.³³ He showed how local growers strategically deployed the scale of the local to depict transient migrants workers as outsiders and to dismiss their struggle as illegitimate. In contemporary Ontario, offshore farm workers could similarly be represented negatively on a local scale, as intruders and a threat to the rural community. They could also be depicted positively on an international scale as appreciated helping hands who migrate long distances to help build and maintain a strong agricultural economy in Ontario. Below I examine how the newsprint media represents offshore workers on different scales and what kinds of role are given to offshore labour on these scales. I suggest that these scale-particular representations convey political messages to the reader that lend ideological legitimacy to the offshore program.

In the newspaper content analysis below I pursue two main research questions that relate to the cultural production of landscape and offshore labour. First, what is the situation of foreign migrant workers within the imagination of rural landscape in Ontario? Second, what is the role of spatial scale in the construction of particular images of foreign migrant workers?

Research design

The deployment of racial stereotypes and representations of migrants as cultural and economic threats has a history in the Canadian media.³⁴ In a review of the literature on media representations of minorities, Mahtani points to studies that see the portrayal of ethnic minorities in the media as central to maintaining racism and Eurocentric hegemony.³⁵ In a migration context, Sean Hier and Joshua Greenberg recently showed that the media depicted unwanted Chinese migrants as human cargo, boat people and a human avalanche.³⁶ Due to the media's proximity to public discourse, I chose to analyse Ontario's daily newspapers to investigate the representation of offshore labour.

Discourse analysis often focuses on key terms, cultural labels and linguistic codes to reveal the authors' attitudes toward people and events.³⁷ In the analysis below, I concentrate mostly on the contents and narratives presented in newspaper stories to extract more complex images and often taken-for-granted ideas about offshore farm workers.³⁸ In particular, I seek to unveil the ideological underpinnings of the discourse of offshore labour circulating through the newsprint media.³⁹

The voices reflected in this discourse are those of newspaper reporters and writers. Even farmers, residents and offshore workers who are occasionally quoted in newspaper articles were carefully selected as interviewees, and it can be assumed that reporters cautiously screen the interviews for quotations that convey particular viewpoints.⁴⁰ My interest focuses on how these powerful voices of the newsprint media represent offshore labour. While migrant workers themselves may be best able to convey their own experiences of participating in the offshore program,⁴¹ newspaper articles are better suited to uncover the public attitudes towards the offshore program and offshore workers.

The press rarely speaks with a single voice. Instead, discourses perpetuating in the newsprint media are complex and multi-dimensional.⁴² The analysis below revealed no single image of foreign farm workers or the offshore program. Rather, authors and newspapers present various perspectives within a dynamic debate. I attempt to reveal these perspectives by presenting multiple viewpoints – for example, linking geographical scales of representation to different narratives.⁴³

The analysis concentrates on Ontario daily newspapers that are electronically accessible through the web-based search engines *Newsscan*, *EBSCO*, *Elibrary*, *CBCA* and *Canadian Newsdisc*. The sample covers the period between 1 January 1997 and 6 May 2002. In cases where the electronic archives do not reach back as far as January 1997, only electronically accessible issues were used. In addition, the survey examined a special series about migrant farm workers published in 1996 in the *Simcoe Reformer*. Table 1 depicts the sample profile.

TABLE 1 Newspapers included in the search by number of articles

| Newspaper | Years searched | No. of articles |
|--------------------------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| <i>Beacon-Herald</i> (Stratford) | Nov. 2001–2002 | 0 |
| <i>Brantford Expositor</i> | 1998–2002 | 13 |
| <i>Brockville Recorder and Times</i> | 2000–2002 | 1 |
| <i>Cambridge Reporter</i> | 1997–2002 | 0 |
| <i>Chatham Daily News</i> | 1998–2002 | 12 |
| <i>Cornwall Standard Freeholder</i> | 1998–2002 | 0 |
| <i>Daily Miner and News</i> (Kenora) | Nov. 2001–2002 | 0 |
| <i>Daily Observer</i> (Pembroke) | May 2000–2002 | 0 |
| <i>Globe and Mail</i> (Toronto) | 1997–2002 | 1 |
| <i>Guelph Mercury</i> | 1997–2002 | 7 |
| <i>Hamilton Spectator</i> | 1997–2002 | 23 |
| <i>Kingston Whig-Standard</i> | 1998–2002 | 3 |
| <i>Kitchener-Waterloo Record</i> | 1997–2002 | 3 |
| <i>Lindsay Daily Post</i> | May 2000–2002 | 0 |
| <i>London Free Press</i> | 1998–2002 | 9 |
| <i>National Post</i> (Toronto) | 1997–2002 | 2 |
| <i>Niagara Falls Review</i> | 1998–2002 | 7 |
| <i>North Bay Nugget</i> | 1998–2002 | 2 |
| <i>Ottawa Citizen</i> | 1999/01–2002 | 3 |
| <i>Ottawa Sun</i> | 1999–2002 | 5 |
| <i>Owen Sound Sun Times</i> | 1998–2002 | 2 |
| <i>Packet and Times</i> (Orillia) | May 2000–2002 | 1 |
| <i>Port Hope Evening Guide</i> | 1998–2002 | 1 |
| <i>Sarnia Observer</i> | 1998–2002 | 1 |
| <i>Sault Star</i> | 1998–2002 | 1 |
| <i>Simcoe Reformer</i> | Dec. 1996 | 13 |
| <i>St Catharines Standard</i> | 1998–2002 | 20 |
| <i>Sudbury Star</i> | 1998–2002 | 1 |
| <i>Times-Journal</i> (St Thomas) | July 2000–2002 | 0 |
| <i>Timmins Daily Press</i> | 1998–2002 | 1 |
| <i>Toronto Star</i> | 1997–2002 | 12 |
| <i>Toronto Sun</i> | 1999–2002 | 1 |
| <i>Welland Tribune</i> | 1999–2002 | 3 |
| <i>Windsor Star</i> | 1999–2002 | 33 |

Articles, editorials, letters to the editor and book reviews were selected on the basis of a search on the keywords: *labour(er/s)*, *worker(s)*, *farm*, *migrant(s)*, *seasonal*, *temporary*, *fruit pick(ing/er/s)*, and *transient*. After a cursory content review, only articles dealing with foreign farm workers or directly related issues were retained in the sample. If an article made reference to previous articles, the latter were used if they addressed issues relevant to the analysis.

Results

Migrant workers in the rural landscape

Migrant workers are not perceived as an integral, constitutive part of Ontario's rural landscape.⁴⁴ Rather, they are represented as a foreign element in a landscape defined

by European-Canadians who have farmed the land for generations. Although newspaper articles often mentioned bicycle-riding Jamaicans and Mexicans, recognizing them in the visual scenery of rural Southern Ontario, their presence is perceived as misplaced. They differ from European-Canadian farmers, whose image may appear in the popular imagination of rural landscape as handling big farming machinery and travelling unnoticed through the rural landscape by car or pickup truck. The images of bicycle-riding migrant workers reinforce the sense of un-belonging.

The images of misplacement and un-belonging are reinforced by reports in the newsprint media of bicycle accidents, road safety training, and secondhand bike donations. For example, most newspapers in this sample reported the collision between two Mexican cyclists near Windsor in 2001 which resulted in one death, and the death in 1999 of two Jamaican workers who were killed by a drunk driver. The victims were almost always referred to as 'Mexicans' or 'Jamaicans', implying the status of racialized other. *The Branford Expositor*, for example, writes: 'The driver of the vehicle was travelling too fast, but he was also impaired, and it was the impairment that caused the deaths of the Jamaicans'.⁴⁵

After these spectacular accidents, newspapers announced that Niagara on the Lake offered bicycle safety training for offshore workers, and the Building Bridges Through Bicycles program in Leamington won the Peter F. Drucker Award for Canadian Nonprofit Innovation. University of Guelph student Emmanuelle Lopez-Bastos was featured in the Guelph Mercury for organizing a bicycle drive for migrant workers.⁴⁶ The extensive reporting of these programs affirms the stereotype of the bicycle-riding foreign worker as an alien, yet visible, element of the rural Ontario landscape.

Some articles acknowledge the treatment of migrant workers as separate from the rural village community. *Windsor Star* labour reporter Mary Agnes Welch, for example, writes about a festival in Leamington:

There was a rockin' big party in the town's back yard this summer, complete with dancing, a blaring stereo, spicy food and some patriotic hollering. The town barely noticed.⁴⁷ Hidden in the parking lot behind St. Michael's Church, hundreds of Mexican migrant workers gathered on the third Sunday in September to celebrate their country's independence from Spanish colonial rule.[. . .]/Much like the Mexicans themselves, the four-hour festival barely registered beyond St. Michael's property line.⁴⁸

Apparently, the Leamington community does not incorporate migrant workers into the imagined landscape of their town.

Another article confirmed that offshore workers are seen as separate from the Newmarket village community, and emphasized the need to establish a special ministry program to bring Mexican migrant workers in contact with the local community. A parish social minister is quoted as saying: 'The outreach aspect here is that people deserve to be included in the community and not just used and ignored'.⁴⁹

The exclusion of offshore workers from the imagined village landscape, and their incorporation in the agricultural landscape only as a distant image of bicycle riders who can be viewed when passing by in a car, represent offshore workers as separate and not-belonging. However, while this 'us versus them' perspective denies offshore workers membership in the rural community, it does not amount to a legitimization of

exploitative labour conditions and material inequities. Such a project is associated with the discursive deployment of scale.

Putting migrants in their scale

The construction of offshore worker identity relies on dualisms created on different spatial scales. The first dualism distinguishes between the workplace and the living space. The workplace is valorized while the living space is devalued. A former apple picker wrote in the *Toronto Star* about the skills of his foreign colleague:

Even though I thought I knew how to, as Frost wrote, 'Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall' the precious fruit, I was still chided occasionally by Winston, the crew foreman. Winston had the air of a Rastafarian patriarch and the hands of a concert pianist when it came to judging fruit. He could tell a $2\frac{1}{2}$ -inch apple from a $2\frac{1}{3}$ -inch apple by cradling it between thumb and forefinger for a split second before putting it in the correct bin. 'Delicately, you must handle them delicately,' his resonant and musically Jamaican voice would rumble up from his post by the sorting bins. It was a voice that seldom needed to be raised. As he spoke, his penetrating gaze would catch mine through the foliage and he would demonstrate the correct technique with eloquent, emphatic gestures, the master directing a careless apprentice.⁵⁰

The same author dwells later in the article on the differences between Canadian and Jamaican workers,⁵¹ but at the same time appeals to the human equality of both.

As tons of apples flew delicately into the bins, spirited discussions of every aspect of life in Canada and Jamaica echoed throughout the trees. When passionate disagreement flared too close to confrontation, there was one phrase that dispelled the tension: 'You be you. Me am me.'/The courtly grace and effectiveness of this phrase never ceased to amaze me. This ability to acknowledge and even to honour valid differences while remaining friends is the mark of truly civilized people.⁵²

While the admiration of the experience and skills affirm the value of the migrant in the workplace, a romanticized image of difference and human equality conceals the structural disadvantages and the condition of 'unfreedom' imposed by the offshore program.⁵³

Photographs accompanying the newspaper articles tend to reinforce the notion of the skilled and compliant foreigner whose labour contributes to the success of the business, while the Canadian farm owner oversees the operation. For example, the *Toronto Star* printed a picture depicting Gary Cooper, a farmer and president of the Foreign Agricultural Resource Management Service (FARMS), 'chatting' and giving instructions, while one of his offshore employees unloads a bucket of freshly picked apples.⁵⁴

The ideological underpinnings of this narrative are revealed in text sequences which suggest that the natural qualities of offshore workers and their 'soft hands' translate into economic benefit to growers and ultimately explain the success of Ontario's horticulture industry. *The Hamilton Spectator* writes:

"The offshore workers are said to 'have soft hands,' a reference to the fact that the fruit they handle is rarely damaged.[...] If inspectors find too many apples bruised, they'll grade an entire truckload as cider apples which means the farmer gets \$3 a bushel instead of \$11".⁵⁵

According to some newspaper articles, an additional benefit is the high productivity of migrant workers relative to Canadian workers. *The Sarnia Observer* writes:

[Farm-] Co-owner Bill Reid says he has to hire Mexicans because Canadians won't do the work. 'We can't get them. The kids don't even want to pick rocks anymore. They want \$12 an hour or they won't even think about it.' [...] The Mexicans [...] 'They're good workers,' Linda (the wife of Bill Reid) says. "They pick, prune, hoe, they do whatever has to be done." Bill Reid says Canadians he's hired in the past would pick an average of 50 quarts of strawberries a day. The Mexicans, by way of contrast, will collect upwards of 200. And they're 'tickled pink' to work as many hours as they can.⁵⁶

Despite recognizing the value of offshore workers, the author of this report stops short of acknowledging that the threat of expulsion from the program and deportation from Canada exerts the pressure that forces migrants to work harder and longer hours than Canadians. The condition of unfreedom, which creates the value associated with migrant labour in the first place, goes unmentioned.

While the valorization of offshore labour is necessary to justify the employment of foreign workers as economically rational, the migrants' living space, which does not serve this economic objective, is devalued. For example, an article in the *Ottawa Sun* degrades the living quarters of migrant workers relative to the 'outside', or the fields in which they work:

The two-bedroom trailer the four Barbadians call home has a full bathroom, a kitchen and a living room with a television. Not spacious, but for these guys, the space is outside.⁵⁷

The devaluation of living space dehumanizes foreign migrants. The de-emphasis of the space where workers spend their off-work time and the simultaneous emphasis of the workplace signifies that offshore workers are primarily workers rather than human beings. According to the workplace/living space narrative offshore workers are labour power – a commodity bought by growers as an input factor for their operations. Their needs, desires and integrity as human beings are less important. As abstract labour, offshore workers serve the main purpose of generating value for the growers to run their operations profitably.⁵⁸

Some news reports presented counter-narratives describing the workers' living quarters as 'home-away-from-home'. For example, after a fire in Shrewsbury destroyed the living quarters of 12 workers from Trinidad, the report noted the personal loss for these workers:

Jim Clendenning, their employer, agreed this was a terrible thing to happen to the men./'This is their home-away-from-home. They took pride in this house and they were already purchasing things to go back to Trinidad,' he said. 'Three or four lost everything they had. . . they're pretty upset about it all and being so far away from home doesn't make it any easier.'⁵⁹

However, this article is not written in the context of a workplace/living space dualism, but rather focuses on a particular event that occurred within the home of migrant workers. It does not challenge the general devaluation of the living space relative to the workplace.

A second dualism differentiates between the space of the farm and the space of the community. Within these two spaces, offshore farm workers assume different roles.

On the farms, they are depicted as desired, even irreplaceable, labour. For example, the *Ottawa Citizen* writes:

'Without migrant workers, we wouldn't have a fruit and vegetable industry in Ontario,' says Alex Just, 41, who has been using migrant workers for about 11 years.⁶⁰

Newspaper narratives echo Basok's observation that migrant workers are a 'structural necessity' to Ontario's horticulture industry.⁶¹ Offshore workers enable growers to stay in business despite economic restructuring and increased competition for labour. *The Owen Sound Sun Times* reports:

When Robert Taylor's father ran the family orchard, growers drew labour from neighbouring farms./Back then, neighbours anxious to earn some extra spending money for Christmas lined up for the opportunity to help harvest Georgian Bay apples./'But the days of the small family farm are over. These days farmers are busy with their own large scale operations or they have jobs off the farm to make ends meet,' said Taylor. By the time Taylor took over the operation of Oaklane Orchards in Clarksburg in 1972, the foreign migrant program had been bringing in workers from the Caribbean for five years.⁶²

To sustain this narrative of migrant workers as a structural necessity for the production process, a parallel narrative represents offshore workers as outsiders to the community. One article featured the complaints of Kingsville residents who wanted the city council to remove their Mexican neighbours. *The Windsor Star* reports:

'Ten migrant workers living in a residential neighbourhood is unacceptable,' said Pitkin, the head of the guidance department at Harrow District Secondary School./'Migrant workers by their very definition are transitional. That home should be used for people who are going to live there and stay there. We want to develop relationships with our neighbours.'/Mayor Pat O'Neil said [...] 'if it's determined that the home is being used illegally, the municipality will take steps to make sure the bylaws are enforced.'⁶³

Migrant workers are also represented as troublemakers in the community. Describing a Mexican Independence Day celebration, the *Windsor Star* reports how the mayor of Leamington expressed his surprise about the peaceful behaviour of the offshore workers.

During a rare day of fun, the workers were treated to a cavalcade of traditional folk dancing, a two-table buffet of Mexican food and some door prizes. A few words of thanks were offered from one or two civic leaders, including Leamington Mayor David Wilkinson, who praised the men for their hard work and delivered a backhanded endorsement of their good behaviour, expressing surprise at 'how little trouble we've had'.⁶⁴

The only time migrant workers are depicted positively in the context of the community is as consumers. The appeal of migrant workers' consumer power to the community is noted in the *Hamilton Spectator*:

Much of the combined \$90-million in salaries [of migrant workers in the Simcoe area] is pumped back into the local economy. According to Cooper [president of FARMS], Christmas comes twice to Simcoe, once in December and another in September./'He's absolutely right,' says Al Schott, owner of Schott's Home Hardware. 'There's been years when the economy wasn't worth a darn and the difference between us winning and losing was the migrant farm worker.'/On Fridays, there are no fewer than 100 migrant workers in his store at a time between 5 p.m. and closing. They buy mostly televisions, stereos and tools, which are much cheaper than they are at home./And that's good news for Rob Lall's cargo company.

He ships stoves, freezers, TVs, stereos, bicycles and toiletries in more than 500 jam-packed crates to the Caribbean each fall.⁶⁵

The Christmas-comes-twice metaphor is also used in the *Toronto Star*:

On Friday evenings, Simcoe area farmers bus their 4,500 foreign workers into town for banking and shopping. [...] 'If you go into town on a Friday night, it's all Mexicans and Jamaicans; they represent 37 percent of my weekly business,' says Lance Farrish, who manages the Simcoe Town Centre's A&P. [...] 'They say Christmas comes twice a year in Simcoe and some say September sales exceed December sales,' says farmer Schuyler. /Rob Lall's cargo company ships stoves, freezers, bicycles, and more than 500 filled-to-the-brim barrels to the Caribbean for the workers each fall. /'Every single store in this town depends on them,' says Lall, who also runs a West Indian food store that's open daily at harvest times and only on weekends when the workers have gone home. /A 1995 Canadian Horticultural Study estimated the seasonal workers boost the rural Ontario economy by \$33.6 million.⁶⁶

The value of migrants' consumer power is also emphasized in a debate revolving around occurrences of racism in the Delhi community. *The Hamilton Spectator* published an article condemning racism in the light of the value migrant workers represented as consumers:

There's no doubt the workers are avid consumers. Friday night is shopping night in the area's urban centres. Clothing, footwear and appliances are favoured goods among the workers, who send them home by ship. The area's retailers count on the workers to spend their money. /'The migrant workers are very important to business,' said Darryl Harriott of Jack's Smoke Shop on Main Street in downtown Delhi.⁶⁷

The narrative on this farm/community scale valorizes the economic contribution of offshore workers as labour and consumers, while emphasizing the need to protect the community from the presence of foreign workers. This narrative reflects an ideology of economic exploitation and social exclusion.

The third dualism distinguishes between Canada and the 'homeland'. This dualism depicts Canada as the superior place to work, and Mexico and the Caribbean as the suitable place for migrant workers to live and raise their families. The emphasis on different earnings levels between Canada and Mexico and the Caribbean facilitates the representation of offshore workers as mere labour in Canada, who become human beings only when they return to their 'homeland'. For example, the *Sarnia Observer* remarks: 'The money isn't a lot, but it goes a long way in their homeland. "They live like kings all winter," (farmer) Bill Reid said.'⁶⁸

Articles consistently stress the superior Canadian wages and working conditions. For example, in a letter to the editor a farmer assertively responds to a report in the *Windsor Star* about offshore workers' working conditions:

I have just spent \$300,000 on housing for my migrant labour and, if I may be so bold, living conditions in housing in Leamington far exceeds those in Mexico. By the way, living quarters are inspected and must meet standards set by the government before they are approved. As for wages, these too are superior to Mexican wages and most migrant workers know this and want to work as many hours as possible. [...] To state the facts, Mexican migrant workers are flown to Canada, provided housing, access to medical care, living conditions and earning potential – all of which are superior to their own country.⁶⁹

Other authors emphasize the harsh economic conditions in Mexico and the Caribbean, which puts the migrants into a desperate situation that is subsequently exploited by

local growers. *The Windsor Star* printed a series about the lives of offshore workers in Mexico.⁷⁰ The following excerpt is taken from this series:

[W]hen Rivera was 16 [...] he had long abandoned school and was soon to start working for an electricity contractor installing wall sockets and light switches in rich people's homes on the outskirts of Irapuato. What's a well-paying skilled trade in Canada pays barely \$4 a day in Mexico and the work is sporadic. And, there's not much chance to ferret out a job in Irapuato that pays like a Canadian greenhouse.⁷¹

The differences in wage structure and living standards between the two geographical contexts are used to justify the low standards for Mexican and Caribbean workers in Canada. The juxtaposition of economic circumstances in Canada and in the 'homeland' allows migrant workers to be depicted as earning high wages, enjoying good working conditions and living in luxurious accommodation – although their earnings are in fact low, their working conditions miserable and their living arrangements poor by Canadian standards.

An important element in the justification of the substandard treatment of offshore workers is that work in Canada enables them to increase their levels of consumption in their home countries. *The Simcoe Reformer* reports on the consumption levels achieved by offshore workers from Jamaica:

The extra income helps them to purchase some of the consumer goods most North Americans take for granted. After nine years, their standard of living is princely compared with that of other local Jamaicans. The Browns dress in Canadian casual wear and have a television, a VCR, a refrigerator, a sewing machine, and a 35-mm camera, all shipped or carried back from stores in Tillsonburg or Delhi [Ontario]. Music is one of Brown's joys and he adds to his collection of cassettes each summer.⁷²

This article is accompanied by a photograph of Mr Brown standing in 'Canadian-style' clothes in front of his motorcycle in his native Jamaica (Figure 1). Another picture in the *Simcoe Reformer* shows two children and their mother as recipients of the money earned in Canada by their father (Figure 2).⁷³ Offshore farm labour is presented as a means to help poor families in foreign countries to move out of poverty.

Conclusion

The discourse of offshore farm labour serves to exclude immigrants from the imagined community of rural Ontario and to legitimate the exploitative and coercive labour practices experienced by migrant workers on Ontario's farms. This discourse does not consist of a singular narrative, but relies on multiple interlocking narratives that coexist on various geographical scales.

Offshore workers are represented in the newsprint media as alien elements in the village and agricultural landscapes of rural Ontario. Notably, the image of the bicycle-riding migrant worker is rooted in the fact that migrant workers cannot afford cars and have no access to alternative means of transportation. Thus, the representation of migrant workers in rural landscape is itself a revelation of their material deprivation. However, the landscape of rural Ontario is not only a reflection of social relations; it



FIGURE 1 Farm worker in 'Canadian-style' clothes with motorcycle (E. Smith, 'Carpenter goes from sawing to sowing in Courtland', *Simcoe Reformer*, 13 Dec. 1996, p. 4)

also expresses an ideal in which bike-riding migrant workers appear as misplaced and not-belonging. This view of landscape shapes the role of foreign migrants as outsiders.

In addition to this narrative of un-belonging, the discourse of offshore labour deploys several narratives on different geographical scales. On the workplace/living space scale, migrants are valorized as workers but devalued as human beings, making them a desired labour force but unwanted people. On the farm/community scale, migrants are depicted as a structural necessity for Ontario's farming operations and a valuable asset to the local retail sector, but as a nuisance and cultural threat to the rural community. The narrative on the Canada/homeland scale represents Canada as a superior workplace, offering an explanation for the attraction of migrant workers to Canada. At the same time, the economic inferiority of the country of origin justifies substandard working conditions in Canada as economic opportunities for the foreign workers and as development assistance to the origin countries.

These interlocking narratives constitute a powerful discourse of offshore labour that simultaneously identifies migrants as cultural threat, valorizes their economic contribution but subordinates their labour. This discourse not only commodifies offshore labour but also represents offshore workers as an inferior commodity. Moreover, the exploitative and coercive labour practices of the offshore program, which have become a structural necessity to Ontario's horticulture industry, are now justified as an all-win situation which enables poor families in developing counties to raise their consumption levels, strengthens Ontario's agricultural economy, and preserves the cultural integrity of the village community. Through exposing these interlocking narratives, the analysis revealed the power of media discourse in masking the harsh material realities of the



FIGURE 2 Recipients of money earned in Canada (E. Smith, 'Farmers defend use of Caribbean workers in H-N; *Simcoe Reformer*, 13 Dec. 1996, p. 4)

offshore program, while lending ideological support for the continuation and expansion of existing farm labour practices.

A wider implication of this research is that the production of landscape and discourses of labour should not be seen as a-geographical or operating on a single scale. In tandem with the material manifestation of the rural economy, which relates to international wage structures, local communities and particular home-work relations, the cultural representations of offshore workers penetrate various scales. I found that representations coordinated on three scales produce a powerful and pervasive discourse that legitimates the current labour regime and thereby assumes an important role in the regulation of labour.

Some researchers have argued that scale can be strategically deployed to initiate policy shifts and manipulate discursive meanings.⁷⁴ For example, agricultural migrant workers in California evoked wider-scale notions of justice to combat the locally produced label of outsider that discredited their political claims.⁷⁵ In the context of the discourse of offshore labour in Ontario, media-based narratives extend onto three vital scales of representation. However, counter-narratives can potentially destabilize and subvert these scale-particular narratives. For example, an appeal to universal human equality could call into question the legitimacy of the differential treatment of Canadian and Caribbean or Mexican workers. What the above analysis suggests is that the scales on which the discourse of offshore labour is constituted mirror the scales in which the rural economy is materially embedded. A critical question in my view, therefore, is whether and how meaningful counter-narratives can be simultaneously produced on various scales. Only if counter-narratives are coordinated on several scales we will be capable of reshaping the manner in which the rural economy materially operates.

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Notes

- ¹ T. Basok, *Tortillas and tomatoes: transmigrant Mexican harvesters in Canada* (Montreal, McGill-Queens's University Press, 2002); V. Satzewich, *Racism and the incorporation of foreign labour: farm labour migration to Canada since 1945* (London, Routledge, 1991).
- ² e.g. J.A. Cross, D. Jackson-Smith and B. Barham, 'Ethnicity and farm entry behavior', *Rural sociology* **65** (2000), pp. 461–83.
- ³ J. Berger, *Ways of seeing* (London, Viking, 1972).
- ⁴ T. Basok, *Tortillas and tomatoes*.
- ⁵ E. Wall, 'Personal labour relations and ethnicity in Ontario agriculture', in V. Satzewich, ed., *Deconstructing a nation: immigration, multiculturalism and racism in '90s Canada* (Halifax, Fernwood, 1992), p. 264.
- ⁶ D. Greenhill and J. Aceytuno, 'Managed migration and the seasonal agricultural worker program' (Vancouver, Research on Immigration and Integration in the Metropolis, working paper series S7 2000).
- ⁷ Satzewich, *Racism and the incorporation of foreign labour*, p. 136.
- ⁸ Basok, *Tortillas and tomatoes*, pp. 33–7.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 33–7.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 58–68.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 89–105.
- ¹³ Basok, *Tortillas and tomatoes*; Satzewich, *Racism and the incorporation of foreign labour*.
- ¹⁴ R. Miles, *Capitalism and unfree labour: anomaly or necessity?* (London, Tavistock, 1987).
- ¹⁵ Basok, *Tortillas and tomatoes*, p. 4.
- ¹⁶ See also Wall, 'Personal labour relations and ethnicity in Ontario agriculture'.
- ¹⁷ Basok, *Tortillas and tomatoes*, p. 38.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ G.L. Henderson, 'What (else) we talk about when we talk about landscape', in C. Wilson and P. Groth, eds, *Everyday America: cultural landscape studies after J.B. Jackson* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2003), pp. 179–98.
- ²⁰ Berger, *Ways of seeing*; also D. Cosgrove, *Social formation and symbolic landscape* (London, Croom Helm, 1985).
- ²¹ S. Daniels and D. Cosgrove, 'Introduction: iconography and landscape', in D. Cosgrove and S. Daniels, eds, *The iconography of landscape: essays on the symbolic representation, design and use of past environments* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 1.
- ²² D. Mitchell, 'There's no such thing as culture: towards a reconceptualization of the idea of culture in geography', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* **20** (1995), pp. 102–16.
- ²³ G. Rose, *Feminism and geography: the limits of geographical knowledge* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1993); D. Gregory, *Geographical imaginations* (Oxford,

- Blackwell, 1994); T. Cresswell, *In place/out of place: geography, ideology and transgression* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
- ²⁴ D. Sibley, *Geographies of exclusion: society and difference in the West* (London, Routledge, 1995).
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 108.
- ²⁶ D. Mitchell, *The lie of the land: migrant workers and the California landscape* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
- ²⁷ Basok, *Tortillas and tomatoes*, p. 3.
- ²⁸ J. Smart, 'Borrowed men on borrowed time: globalization, labour migration and local economies in Alberta', *Canadian journal of regional science* **20** (1997), p. 149.
- ²⁹ S.A. Marston, 'The social construction of scale', *Progress in human geography* **24** (2000), pp. 219–42; A. Herod and M.W. Wright, 'Placing scale: an introduction', in A. Herod and M.W. Wright, eds, *Geographies of power: Placing Scale* (Malden, MA, Blackwell, 2002), pp. 1–14; D. Harvey, *Spaces of hope* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000); B. Miller, *Geography and social movements: comparing antinuclear activism in the Boston area* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2000).
- ³⁰ A. Herod, 'The production of scale in United States labour relations', *Area* **23** (1991), p. 84.
- ³¹ D. Delaney and H. Leitner, 'The political construction of scale', *Political geography* **16** (1997), pp. 94–5.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 93.
- ³³ D. Mitchell, 'Scales of justice: localist ideology, large-scale production, and agricultural labor's geography of resistance in 1930s California', in A. Herod, ed., *Organizing the landscape: geographical perspectives on labor unionism* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 162.
- ³⁴ M. Mahtani, 'Representing minorities: Canadian media and minority identities', *Canadian ethnic studies* **33** (2001), pp. 99–133 ; T. van Dijk, *Racism and the press* (London, Routledge, 1991); D. Zolf, 'Comparisons of multicultural broadcasting in Canada and four other countries', *Canadian ethnic studies* **21** (1989), pp. 13–26.
- ³⁵ Mahtani, 'Representing minorities.'
- ³⁶ S.P. Hier and J.L. Greenberg, 'Constructing a discursive crisis: risk, problematization and *illegal* Chinese in Canada', *Ethnic and racial studies* **25** (2002), pp. 490–513.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*
- ³⁸ S. Taylor, 'Locating and conducting discourse analytic research', in M. Wetherell, S. Taylor and S.J. Yates, eds, *Discourse as data: a guide to analysis* (London, Sage, 2001), pp. 5–48.
- ³⁹ N. Fairclough, *Discourse and social change* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1992).
- ⁴⁰ Mahtani, 'Representing minorities', pp. 114–18.
- ⁴¹ For an account of voices of migrant workers themselves, see Basok, *Tortillas and tomatoes*.
- ⁴² I. Crespi, *The public opinion process: how the people speak* (London, Erlbaum, 1997); S. Taylor, 'Locating and conducting discourse analytic research', in Wetherell *et al.*, *Discourse as data*, pp. 5–48.
- ⁴³ Critics may ask why the analysis below does not address gendered representations in greater detail. Only one article identified through the search (M.A. Welch, 'Women living in squalor; bunkhouse a 'bombardment'; cannery blames Mexican workers', *Windsor Star* (3 Nov. 2000), p. A10) mentions female workers employed in a cannery. While I recognize that representations of masculinity are important in the construction of the image of the migrant worker, I also feel that I do not have the empirical evidence to warrant an in-depth discussion of this topic.

- ⁴⁴ Since I reviewed only articles which mention foreign farm workers, it would have been difficult to examine the absence of migrant farm workers from the popular imagination of rural landscape; see Mitchell, *The lie of the land*.
- ⁴⁵ L. Lee, 'The silent victims', *Branford Expositor* (22 Oct. 1999), p. A9.
- ⁴⁶ J. Shuttleworth, 'Your old bike offers freedom to someone', *Guelph Mercury* (21 March 2002), p. B7.
- ⁴⁷ To conserve space, I have replaced paragraph breaks in the original text with/.
- ⁴⁸ M.A. Welch, 'Services inadequate for "hard-working men"', *Windsor Star* (2 Nov. 2000), p. A13.
- ⁴⁹ 'Catholic parishes welcome migrant workers from Latin America', *Welland Tribune* (10 Oct. 2001), p. A10.
- ⁵⁰ J. Morrissey, 'Apple picking's varied fruit', *Toronto Star* (30 Oct. 1997), p. A24.
- ⁵¹ Mahtani, in 'Representing Minorities', finds that the deployment of racial stereotypes is a common practice among reporters and other media workers. Satzewich, in *Racism and the incorporation of foreign labour* specifically links processes of racialization with the offshore programme.
- ⁵² Morrissey, 'Apple picking's varied fruit'.
- ⁵³ Basok, *Tortillas and tomatoes*; Satzewich, *Racism and the incorporation of foreign labour*.
- ⁵⁴ R. Lautens, 'Reaping fruits of transient labour', *Toronto Star*, (5 Nov. 2000), p. A10. Unfortunately, the copyright fee for using the photographs was beyond my research budget.
- ⁵⁵ T. Fitzgerald, 'It's hard work and harder being away from your wife and children', *Hamilton Spectator* (6 Oct. 2001), p. A08.
- ⁵⁶ D. McCaffery, 'Canadians don't want farm jobs: but many foreign labourers will take them willingly', *Sarnia Observer* (15 June 1999), p. A1.
- ⁵⁷ B. Gray, 'Core of the farmfare issue', *Ottawa Sun* (9 Sept. 1999), p. 16.
- ⁵⁸ K. Marx, in *Das Kapital: Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, vol. I (1867), repr. in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, vol. XXIII (Berlin, Dietz, 2001), p. 65, makes a distinction between abstract and concrete labour. While concrete labour is qualitatively distinct and tied to the production of a particular good, abstract labour generates value measured by the capacity for exchanging the produced good. G.L. Henderson, in *California and the fictions of capital* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2002), pp. 81–3, describes how rural labour in California became commodified in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, he also notes that it was not 'abstract' in a pure sense, since farmers discriminated between workers on the basis of their race rather than the exchange value they could generate. Space constraints do not permit a full discussion of the racialization of offshore workers here, but see Satzewich, *Racism and the incorporation of foreign labour*.
- ⁵⁹ H. Kok-Wright, 'Farm workers left with nothing: midnight fire guts home to 13 workers', *Chatham Daily News* (29 Oct. 1999), p. 3.
- ⁶⁰ K. Egan, 'Importing workers to export food: an army of 10,000 migrant workers pick crops on Ontario farms', *Ottawa Citizen* (10 Aug. 1998), p. C1.
- ⁶¹ Basok, *Tortillas and tomatoes*.
- ⁶² R. Avery, 'Help wanted: offshore workers necessary in modern agriculture, growers say', *Owen Sound Sun Times* (29 Sept. 1999), p. A5.
- ⁶³ B. Stewart, 'Home use under fire: neighbours charge migrant farm workers out of place', *Windsor Star* (16 July 2001), p. A4. In a later announcement, the newspaper reported that the accommodation of the 10 workers was legal and in agreement with local zoning ordinances.
- ⁶⁴ Welch, 'Services inadequate for "hard-working men"'.

- ⁶⁵ Fitzgerald, 'It's hard work and harder being away from your wife and children'.
- ⁶⁶ A. Infantry, 'Many Caribbean earn a living toiling on farms in Ontario', *Toronto Star* (2 Nov. 2000), pp. A1, 10.
- ⁶⁷ L. Prokaska, 'Racist incidents isolated: farmers, migrant workers contribute to area', *Hamilton Spectator* (15 Sept. 1999), p. A06.
- ⁶⁸ McCaffery, 'Canadians don't want farm jobs'.
- ⁶⁹ H. Huy, 'Migrant, Canadian workers treated alike', *Windsor Star* (25 May 2001), p. A11.
- ⁷⁰ M.A. Welch wrote several articles for this series, 'Seasons in the sun', including 'Many unhappy returns: workers sent home "extremely sick", official charges' (3 Nov. 2000), p. A11; 'High on the Canadian hog: money "worth the sacrifice"' (4 Nov. 2000), p. G2; 'Coming home: "Sometimes this land doesn't recognize me"' (4 Nov. 2000), p. G3; and 'Quest for cash tears families: "It doesn't feel good to have him gone"' (4 Nov. 2000), p. G1.
- ⁷¹ Welch, 'High on the Canadian hog'.
- ⁷² E. Smith, 'Carpenter goes from sawing to sowing in Courtland', *Simcoe Reformer* (13 Dec. 1996), p. 4.
- ⁷³ E. Smith, 'Harvest of hope', *Simcoe Reformer* (13 Dec. 1999), pp. 2–3.
- ⁷⁴ Harvey, *Spaces of hope*; Miller, *Geography and social movements*; Herod, 'The production of scale'.
- ⁷⁵ Mitchell, 'The scales of justice'.